

“Surprised by Hope”

So I've been thinking about buying an iPad.

For years I've been lugging around my old leather-bound Franklin Planner, which these days invariably widens the eyes of the young. “That's old school!” they exclaim, with equal parts marvel and pity.

My Franklin Planner is not just old school. It's bulky, it's heavy, it's not searchable, and it links up with nothing but my own increasingly unreliable brain.

The iPad says “now,” it says “happenin’” it says—I'm not sure what it says, but whatever it says has got to be cooler than my Franklin Planner.

Still, I'd heard Greenpeace was attacking the iPad for using cloud computing, whatever that is.

So when I saw an Op Ed in the Sunday New York Times headlined “How Green Is My iPad?” promising a “life-cycle assessment” of the iPad's “ecological impact,” I thought, “Perfect! Now I can decide.”

Well, first came a disclaimer that “some technical details,” such as screen manufacture, aren't publicly available and therefore weren't evaluated, and they were analyzing the iPad's use as an electronic reader only.

Then they said to compare the iPad ecologically with a hard-copy book, I'd have to know if I was going to order my book online for shipment by air or buy it from my local bookstore, and then if I was going to drive, bicycle, walk, or take public transportation to the bookstore, and how far the bookstore is.

Then they said if I read my book at night, my light bulb will use more energy than the iPad's screen, but if I read in daylight, I'm better off with a book.

Then they said some discarded electronics are dismantled by hand in third-world countries, poisoning child workers, while others are incinerated with emissions controls and metals recovery—but then a book dumped in a landfill has toxic impacts, too.

“With respect to fossil fuels, water use and mineral consumption,” the report concluded, “the impact of one e-reader payback equals roughly 40 to 50 books. When it comes to global warming, though, it's 100 books; with human health consequences, it's somewhere in between.”

I have three advanced degrees, including a masters degree in natural resources policy.

After reading this life-cycle assessment, I felt like an idiot.

The fact is I buy books locally and online. Most of them I buy used, which the authors didn't even consider. Sometimes I read at night. Sometimes I read in the daytime.

How can I possibly make an intelligent decision about an iPad or anything else with so many variables I can't calculate and the experts can't evaluate?

The more I thought about it, the angrier I got: I shouldn't have to figure all this stuff out, and neither should you.

If corporations like Apple had to pay the real cost to the planet and to people of the resources they use, and if all of us had to pay the real cost of energy, then the whole life-cycle impact of a product would be there for all to see in one universally understood number: *price*.

Instead, all of us conscientious, earth-friendly people are supposed to stand in the aisles of supermarkets and megastores with magnifying glasses studying the fine print on labels we can't understand written by corporations with a vested interest in fooling us.

In the time I spent studying that life-cycle assessment of the iPad and trying to factor in the vagaries of my personal lifestyle, I could have made several phone calls to my representatives in Congress demanding action on climate change.

If all the good people trying to calculate the carbon footprint of everything from the bananas on our breakfast cereal to the jet we took on our last vacation (if we could afford a vacation)—if we used that same time and energy and intelligence to march on Washington, we'd have a revolution by now!

People like Don Blankenship, CEO of Massey Energy Company—they love lifestyle environmentalism.

Don sleeps like a baby.

Because lifestyle environmentalism keeps the responsibility for saving the planet on suckers like you and me, and away from guys like him who make millions blasting the tops off mountains and killing workers in unsafe mines and then pay off judges and congressman to look the other way.

And it's all perfectly legal.

I'm preaching this morning on hope. Because hope can be hard to find.

MIT scientists now predict that global warming will be twice as severe as estimated just six years ago. This past winter, which the right wing touted as proof that global warming is a hoax, was actually the fifth warmest on record, and NASA projects that 2010 will be the hottest year ever. Ninety percent of the world's glaciers are in retreat, and those in Glacier National Park are likely to be gone by the end of the decade. The Arctic is expected to be nearly ice-free in summer in thirty years. Already we are hemorrhaging biodiversity, losing a hundred species to extinction every 24 hours.

And as we sit in contemplative worship here in Vermont on this spectacular spring morning, crude oil is gushing out of control into the Gulf of Mexico.

Please don't call it a spill. You spill something out of a container, like a teacup or a tanker or a pipeline.

They punched a hole in the earth's crust a mile underwater. You can call it a blowout, a bloodletting, a tragedy, or an inevitability, but don't call it a spill.

The world's governments seem incapable of meaningful response.

Depending on whom you believe, the Copenhagen climate conference last winter was either a disappointment or a travesty, producing neither targets nor timetables for change. Blanketed by energy industry lobbyists, Congress can't agree even on legislation everyone knows is inadequate. And the energy companies figure that when all the fuss about the blowout in the Gulf blows over, American oil junkies will come crawling back on our knees for our next fix.

Are they wrong?

An NBC News poll taken last week, while crude oil was exploding into the Gulf of Mexico, showed 60% of Americans support increased offshore oil drilling. Two months ago a Gallup poll found 48% of Americans think the threat of global warming is exaggerated, the highest proportion in the thirteen years they've posed the question. And when Americans are asked what issues they plan to vote on, the environment consistently comes in dead last.

Where is hope in all this?

Sometimes when I'm afraid, I ask myself, "What's the worst that can happen?"

Asking that question, I turn and face my fear. When I face my fear, it loses its power over me. My mind grows clearer, unclouded by nameless dread. Anxiety gives way to resolve, sometimes even a kind of peace.

Like a Buddhist meditating on my own inevitable death, I am left with a deeper appreciation of life in the present moment, and I find more courage and creativity.

So what's the worst that can happen?

Global collapse: wholesale destruction of agricultures, economies, governments, civilizations, human suffering on an unprecedented scale or human extinction that takes countless other species down with us.

Serious business.
But nothing lasts forever.
Everything that lives dies.

No organism lives forever. No civilization endures forever. No species escapes extinction. Why should ours be any different?

To accept the mortality of the human species is not pessimism, but realism—not morbidity, but maturity.

So if the days of our lives as a species are numbered, the ultimate question is not our survival—that question is already answered in the negative.

The ultimate question is how we live the days that are given to us.

I choose to live in hope.

No matter how bleak things seem, we don't know how they'll turn out. To assume the worst is arrogance. Humility reminds us we don't know what's going to happen, and if we don't know what's going to happen, we still have hope.

History teaches again and again that when people are called by conscience and compelled by circumstance into a new paradigm, we are capable of astonishing, accelerated, unanticipated change. It happened in the 1960s with civil rights, in the 1970s with the women's movement, in the 1980s when the Berlin Wall came down, just last decade when Americans turned against the war in Iraq.

Who'd have thought when voters in my commonwealth of Massachusetts elected Scott Brown to the Senate in January that we'd have national healthcare reform by March?

"[T]he essence of the ecological worldview is *possibility*," writes Frances Moore Lappé. "Through an ecological lens, ours is not a finished, fixed world of distinct identities but a relational and evolving world. . . . [N]otions of 'fixed' or 'finished' are . . . illusions. Mutually created and ever changing—that is reality. . . . Hope is not what we seek in evidence," Lappé insists, "it is what we become in action."

This kind of hope, of course, is less like optimism and more like faith, a spiritual practice we choose to companion us on a long and hazardous journey, because we know we're more likely to arrive safe at our destination with it than without it.

And once we choose hope, hope expands, stretching the walls of our hearts. Once we dedicate ourselves to hope, we see it more and more all around us.

Amidst the bad news, we notice the good news.

Costa Rica already supplies 95% of its energy from renewable sources. Sweden's energy mix is on track to be oil- and nuclear-free within a decade. Over the last two decades, poor farmers in Niger planted 200 million trees to

regreen 12.5 million acres, one of the most rapid environmental restorations in history. In California, solar-powered installations have multiplied a hundredfold in the last decade, from 500 to 50,000. Since 2005, over a thousand mayors, including Mayor Bob Kiss here in Burlington, have signed the US Conference of Mayors Climate Protection Agreement, vowing to reduce carbon emissions in their cities to conform to the Kyoto Protocol.

Since the Supreme Court decision in January allowing unlimited corporate spending on election campaigns, donations to groups advocating public financing of elections have quadrupled.

Even the iPad may be part of the solution. I still don't understand cloud computing. But I understand that the Internet has opened undreamed of channels of communication and democratic participation that can bring down dictators.

Who knows what's possible now? Who dares bet on catastrophe? I'm betting on hope.

What have I got to lose?

Maybe we are entering not eternal darkness but a birth canal, the pain we feel the pangs of new life breaking free.

It took the abuses of the Gilded Age to launch the Progressive Era. It took the agony of the Great Depression to lift the New Deal. It took the Cuyahoga River catching fire to pass the Clean Water Act. Like the stubborn mule in the old story, we need a two-by-four to the head just to get our attention.

Last Thursday, a fair spring day under a bright blue sky, I walked in meditation in a public park, mindfully breathing in and out with each step. My gaze fell upon a piece of litter, an empty Sweet 'n' Low packet shocking pink against the beautiful green grass. I leaned down, picked it up, put in my pocket.

And I thought, there will always be beauty, and as long as there are people, there will always be litter and there will always be people picking up litter.

Sometimes, I'll be the one littering, metaphorically. Sometimes I'll be picking it up.

None of us is pure.

But all of us, deep down, are good.

At the turn of the twentieth century, with the upwelling forces of industrialization, militarism, and imperialism about to explode into the First World War, a 23-year-old German poet named Rainer Maria Rilke sensed God walking with us "silently out of the night," speaking "words we dimly hear":

*You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.
Flare up like flame
and make big shadows I can move in.
Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.
Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.
Give me your hand.*

Today, as we look beyond the horizon of despair, we see however faintly a future of hope—a world where we live harmoniously and sustainably, where freedom is redeemed by justice, where nature is not wantonly exploited and despoiled but revered in awe and wonder and delight.

Let us hold this future in our mind's eye. Let us claim it and proclaim it and live it every moment of our lives.

Let us be surprised by hope.

Amen and Blessed Be.

Benediction by Deena Metzger

There are those who are trying to set fire to the world.
We are in danger.
There is time only to work slowly.
There is no time not to love.

Amen and Blessed Be.